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SUBJECT: IRAQIS IN JORDAN: VIEWS FROM UNHCR

REF: Amman 6518

Classified by DCM Greg Berry, per 1.5 (b) and (d).

1. (S/NF) Summary and Comment: According to UNHCR officials, recognized refugees and asylum seekers represent 5,000 of the estimated 300,000 Iraqis resident in Jordan. With just a ten percent refugee recognition rate, UNHCR reports most Iraqis in Jordan are economic migrants who simply are looking for a better life outside Iraq -- and finding it in grey market jobs in Amman, Zarqa and Irbid. This year, UNHCR has seen a decrease in the number of Iraqi registered asylum seekers, from just over 5,000 in 2001 to just under 4,000 in 2002. UNHCR attributes the decline to a slowdown in resettlement; toughened Jordanian border policies; new Iraqi passport and exit visa policy; and a recent economic upturn in Iraq. UNHCR believes the fact that so few Iraqis seek to regularize their status via UNHCR registration means that most Iraqis have "other means" to live quasi-legally in Jordan, maintaining their status here by traveling frequently between Iraq and Jordan. In recent months, UNHCR has seen a "significant" increase in the detention of recognized refugee and asylum seekers and has heard anecdotal reports of tightened two weeks. ORCA sources separately confirmed that the GOJ has been actively looking for Iraqi agents and has increased deportations, focusing primarily on Iraqi males of military age. UNHCR's low recognition rate, coupled with the current tightening of Iraqi border controls, likely will keep the recognized refugee and asylum seeker population small even as tensions rise inside Iraq. Given the economic focus of Iraqis resident in Jordan, coupled with a high degree of caution regarding their future prospects inside Iraq, UNHCR believes most Iraqis would remain in Jordan for "at least several years" following regime change, waiting to see the long-term effects. End summary and comment.

2. (S/NF) UNHCR officials report that at any given time, roughly 1,000 to 1,200 Iraqis resident in Jordan hold UNHCR refugee status, with another 4,000 or so registered as asylum seekers. Although GID officials routinely cite 300,000 as the number of Iraqis resident in Jordan, UNHCR officials told refcoord they have no independent means of verifying this number but also no reason to question its validity. (GID officials recently told ORCA there currently are 305,000 Iraqis in Jordan.) UNHCR Representative Sten Bronee told refcoord that UNHCR has seen a decrease in the number of Iraqi registered asylum seekers this year, down from just over 5,000 in CY2001 to just under 4,000 in CY2002. Bronee and other UNHCR officials said several factors likely have contributed to the decline: a dramatic slowdown in host country resettlement following the September 11 terrorist attacks; toughened Jordanian border policies; changes in Iraqi passport and exit visa policy; and -- according to status determination officer Soufiane Adjmal -- a recent economic upturn in Iraq. (Comment: Iraq currently is replacing all passports to the new "H" series, a slow and cumbersome process that may well have reduced the number of Iraqis able to travel. At the same time, however, Iraq has waived its previous USD 200 exit visa fee, a factor that in theory should increase the number of Iraqis traveling abroad.)

3. (C) UNHCR officials believe that the majority of the Iraqi population resident in Jordan is a fluid population that moves easily between Iraq and Jordan -- primarily in an effort to maintain legal status here. Noting that several thousand people cross the Iraqi-Jordanian border every day, UNHCR Senior Protection Officer Jacqueline

Parlevliet told refcoord that most Iraqis likely maintain their quasi-legal status in Jordan by returning to Iraq every six months or so. The fact that such a small percentage of Iraqis resident in Jordan seek to regularize

their status via UNHCR registration (mere possession of a UNHCR document identifying an Iraqi as a UNHCR asylum-seeker generally gives Iraqis an additional six-month grace period with the GOJ), Bronee said, indicates that most Iraqis have "other means" to earn a living and maintain quasi-legal status in Jordan. (Comment: It may also indicate that the vast majority of Iraqis understand that they do not meet UNHCR criteria for refugee status and choose not to begin the process.) Nevertheless, Caritas separately reports that there are a number of truly needy Iraqis among the non-refugee population -- primarily elderly Iraqis left behind when other family members migrated from the region.

14. (C) According to UNHCR community development officer Lisa McCann, the majority of recognized Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers live in the poorer neighborhoods of southern and eastern Amman. Smaller concentrations of Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers live in Zarqa and Irbid, the second and third largest cities in Jordan. (Comment: We have heard separately that Iraqis seek housing and grey-market jobs near the industrial parks of Amman, Zarqa and Irbid.) Only a handful of refugees and asylum seekers -- those McCann classified as truly in fear for their lives -- live scattered in rural villages. McCann said that most other Iraqis tend to live in Amman, with downtown's Hashemite Square as their main gathering spot -- the place to see, be seen and find any long-lost friends or relatives. McCann added that for this reason, Hashemite Square is also a known gathering spot for Iraqi intelligence agents -- a fact that makes most refugees and asylum seekers nervous. Citing concern about Iraqi refugees' safety, Caritas recently decided to relocate its US-funded Iraqi refugee assistance programs from Hashemite Square to a more discreet and protected location in Jebel Amman.

15. (S/NF) UNHCR, like our consular section (ref), continues to hear stories of tightened Jordanian border controls. Under previous Jordanian procedures, any Iraqi citizen was granted permission upon entry to stay in Jordan for two weeks, with an automatic extension to three months and a possible, easily obtainable extension of another three months. Now, UNHCR and Caritas officials are hearing anecdotal reports from the Iraqi community that Iraqis are granted permission only for a two-week stay and that certain categories -- young men under the age of 46 -- are denied permission entirely. UNHCR officials also have heard that the GOJ is now actively deporting Iraqis who overstay their two-week residency and is denying permission to these Iraqis to re-enter Jordan. Australian embassy immigration official Todd Jacob separately told refcoord that several Australian family reunification cases -- all young single men -- were denied entry to Jordan by GOJ border officials. UNHCR officials told refcoord that they have formally asked the GOJ to clarify its border procedures, but that the GOJ has not yet responded. (ORCA sources report that under current GOJ procedures, Iraqis are granted permission to stay in Jordan for two weeks only and must immediately register with their local police station upon entry into Jordan. Separately, our consular section has seen cases in which Iraqis who had been denied entry by GOJ officials at the Iraqi border were later able to enter Jordan through Syria.)

16. (S/NP) Parlevliet and UNHCR Representative Sten Bronee confirmed to refcoord that there had been a "significant" increase in the number of recognized Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers detained by the GOJ in recent months. According to Parlevliet, all of the recognized refugees and asylum seekers had been detained on security grounds and released without charge. Parlevliet reported that the detentions stopped abruptly at the beginning of December presumably, she speculated, because the GID had discovered that the recognized refugees and asylum seekers were exactly what they appeared to be. (ORCA sources separately confirmed that the GOJ has been "actively" looking for possible Iraqi agents and has increased deportations, focusing primarily on Iraqi males of military age.)

17. (C) McCann and Parlevliet added that most Iraqi asylum seekers in Jordan appear to be economic migrants, without any strong claim to refugee status. As Parlevliet regime opponents fled in the aftermath of the 1991 uprising. Although Parlevliet told refcoord that she at first was appalled by UNHCR's low recognition rate in Jordan, she now thinks the ten percent recognition rate may even be too high.

18. (C) UNHCR officials believe the Iraqis resident in Jordan would be slow to return home in the event of regime change inside Iraq. Stressing that most Iraqis in Jordan came here seeking a better life, Parlevliet said she suspects that they would take a cautious approach, waiting to see the long-term effects of change in the region. While most of the Iraqis resident in Jordan likely would

welcome regime change, Parlevliet said they likely would adopt the same pragmatic approach to post-Saddam Iraq: are they economically better off in Jordan or Iraq? Absent any pressure from the GOJ to send Iraqis home, Parlevliet said the Iraqi community is likely to remain in Jordan for "at least several years" following regime change.

19. (C) Comment: UNHCR recognized refugees and asylum seekers represent only a very small segment of the Iraqi population resident in Jordan. UNHCR's low recognition rate, the GOJ's tightening of Iraqi border controls, and the fact that the act of seeking asylum inherently raises an Iraqi's profile likely will continue to keep this population relatively small even as tensions rise inside Iraq. We will report via septel on the dynamics of the larger Iraqi community resident in Jordan and its likely role and impact here in the event of hostilities in Iraq.

GNEHM